

Care of Sick Pioneers Fell to Women

Lesson 17

Much of the work of caring for the sick in pioneer times was left to the women. The women who made a specialty of caring for those who were ill were called midwives. This name was given them because they delivered babies where there were no doctors. Even if there were a doctor in the town, he was often too busy to take care of all the babies who were born.



These helpful women had little or no training. They were unselfish and had special talents for nursing the sick. In addition to caring for the mother and her new baby, the midwife kept the house, cooked the meals and cared for the other children in the family. She also cared for diseases and other illnesses.

To these wonderful ladies, the care of the sick was the most important thing in their lives. They would leave their families and go wherever they were called. Riding horseback or walking for miles was part of their daily life. Two or three hours a night was all the sleep they could expect.

A diary of one of these courageous nurses gives us a typical day:

At five o'clock in the morning she went to

take care of a neighbor who was expecting a baby. The baby was born at 8 o'clock. The midwife went home and prepared breakfast for her family. After breakfast she cleaned her house and made soap. At one o'clock, she was called to take care of a neighbor who had cut his foot while chopping wood. She washed the wound out with boiled water, stopped the blood with egg white and sewed up the cut with white silk thread. At 2 o'clock she came home and picked wild strawberries and made jam. While the jam was cooking she carded wool.

The family was just eating dinner when a boy came riding up on a horse. He said his little sister had the croup. Putting the croup kettle under her arm, she got on the back of the horse behind the boy and rode away. Long after midnight she came home to get a few hours sleep before starting another day.

The pioneer people had very little money, but they paid for nursing care if they could. The account book of one of the midwives shows that she sometimes collected 50 cents or a dollar or two.

A training course for nurses was started in the 1880s by Dr. Ellis R. Shipp. She was a graduate of the Philadelphia Medical College for Women. After her students finished their courses with her they would teach the women in their towns and communities.

These courageous, unselfish women probably did more good than will ever be known. They saved many lives and relieved much suffering. The health of the people was aided a great deal by them when no doctors were available.

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